

## **Project NURTURE Brings Teachers to Critically Needed Areas in Schools**

The Douglas County School System, in collaboration with Georgia State University, is on the forefront of developing new teachers to serve in the community through a five-year grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The grant creates two non-traditional pathways for a select group of individuals who exhibit a passion to become educators and who are committed to teaching in the Douglas County School System (DCSS) for a minimum of three years after receiving certification. Through the Network for Urban and Rural Teachers United for Residency Engagement (Project NURTURE), Douglas County is offering opportunities to two different groups of aspiring teachers who will fill critically needed teaching roles in math, science and special education.

The teacher residency pathway is for candidates who hold bachelor's degrees and who desire to become middle or high school math or science teachers. Instead of a salary, residents receive an annual stipend of \$25,000 while spending the school year paired with master teachers in the county and completing coursework through Georgia State University (GSU). The best candidates for this pathway will have taken multiple math or science content courses during their undergraduate studies.

The second pathway is for current DCSS paraprofessionals with bachelor's degrees who wish to become certified teachers in special education. This year, seven paraprofessionals are working in classrooms under the guidance of master teachers while completing their GSU graduate coursework.

**Wilford Smith** is a paraprofessional at New Manchester High School (NMHS) working on his master's in teaching (MAT) through Project NURTURE. Smith retired from a career in law enforcement in 2011 and already has a bachelor's degree and a master of public administration. He says he wanted to be busy and began working as a substitute teacher, quickly becoming attached to the students and teachers. A teacher suggested he get his certification, and Project NURTURE was the perfect method for him to do it.

Smith began taking graduate classes last summer at GSU. With the start of the current 2020-2021 school year, he began working as a paraprofessional at NMHS, taking college classes in the evening. "The classes in college give you theory," says Smith, "and being in the classroom (at NMHS) gives you practical experience. It's a perfect combination. This program is one of the best things I've been involved in personally. You are being groomed among 'family' and friends with mentorship from fellow educators."

Once Smith receives his certification, he will have a MAT, specializing in special education, along with a wealth of classroom experience. "I feel enriched by this program," he says. In school year 2021-2022, he looks forward to leading his own classroom at NMHS or another DCSS high school.

**Kristina Montalban** is a special education paraprofessional at Chapel Hill Elementary School and is following the same path as Smith. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology and will exit the program as a certified teacher in special education with a MAT.

Speaking about the five semester program, Smith says, “it is challenging and the course work is intense, but the support system Project NURTURE provides and the collaborative opportunities make the work very achievable. The connection I have made with my cohort inspires me to keep going in my journey towards becoming a certified educator, and continue working to serve the students in Douglas County. I would highly recommend the program to my peers.”

Smith and Montalban receive mentorship from the master teacher each is paired with. They earn their salary as paraprofessionals and the majority of their tuition at GSU is paid by the grant. Because they are not typical paraprofessionals, they provide a lot of support teaching and sometimes co-teach, ensuring they are well prepared to teach and manage their own classes when the time comes.

*The school system is looking for individuals to participate in both pathways to a MAT degree. The next cohort of Project NURTURE participants will begin this summer with classes at GSU. Contact Davin Auble, program coordinator, at [davin.auble@dcssga.org](mailto:davin.auble@dcssga.org).*